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THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOVIET UNION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

The relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East was governed for more than four decades, from the end of World War II to the end of the Reagan presidency, by the Cold War with all of the attendant assumptions, concepts, institutions and policies essential to "fight" the Cold War. American views of the Soviet Union and of the Soviet bloc, and the policy requirements deriving from that perspective, formed the core of United States foreign and security policy worldwide. Wherever and whenever a policy was framed, and challenges were identified and met, the lens through which the policy was seen had a Soviet filter, with accompanying Cold War assumptions. This was particularly true in the case of the Middle East, which became a major venue of United States-Soviet Union competition soon after the Cold War began. Over the course of more than four decades, the competition and rivalry of the superpowers in the Middle East was a central if not dominant theme in international relations.

The end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe cast doubt on the assumptions and called into question the policies that were designed to deal with regional issues. Nowhere have these assumptions been more soundly challenged than in the Middle East.

Superpower Rivalry in the Middle East

The Middle East is a region to which the superpowers attached great significance and in which they evidenced great interest. The United States and the Soviet Union became the major external powers of consequence in the Middle East in the period since the end of World War II but particularly since the mid-1950s and the retirement of British and French influence from the region. The superpowers had similar and conflicting interests and their policies often clashed, but they avoided direct conflict while their respective clients were involved in war. ¹

The Middle East has been an important area in the foreign policy of most United States administrations since World War II, and Soviet interest and activity in the region has elicited a variety of American policy responses. The first significant official United States policy statement

concerning the Middle East came after World War II, in the form of the Truman Doctrine of 1947. It argued, simply, that there was a Soviet and communist threat in Greece and Turkey and, to a lesser extent, in Iran. Since no other Western state was in a position to help protect these countries from the threat, it fell upon the United States to assume that role.² This established a pattern that has been followed with surprising consistency since that time. The threat of a Soviet challenge was identified and no alternative power was prepared to meet the challenge. The United States responded and sought to restrict Soviet actions in the zone directly threatened. In its response, the United States indicated a willingness to employ military force if necessary to deal with the problem. The Truman Doctrine was followed by the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 that focused on the Arab-Israeli sector of the Middle East.

At the time that British Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced the accelerated British withdrawal east of Suez in 1968 (which was accomplished by 1972), the Persian Gulf sector was not seen as vital to the United States. But there was a growing realization that there were important American interests and a potential Soviet threat which, combined with the British withdrawal, led to the need for a reevaluation of United States policy and the assumption of new commitments and obligations for the area. This, combined with Soviet activities elsewhere and a declining American desire to serve as the world's policeman, led to the promulgation of what later became known as the Nixon Doctrine:

*We shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us . . . we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its own defense.*³

The adoption of the Nixon Doctrine led to a Persian Gulf policy which sought to create and support surrogates to ensure regional stability. The "two-pillar policy," focusing on Iran and Saudi Arabia, was perceived to be responsive to a potential threat from the Soviet Union and its allies. Although the Nixon Doctrine was not designated specifically for the Middle East, it was applied to the Gulf sector and gave the Shah of Iran a virtual blank check for the acquisition of United States military equipment to build Iran's strength and capability to help ensure stability and security in the Gulf.

The policy of the United States, as delineated by the Nixon Doctrine, was carried into the Ford administration and the early days of the Carter tenure, which focused its initial attention on the Arab-Israeli conflict and its resolution.⁴

The Carter administration initially approached the role of the Soviet Union from a different perspective, one which was challenged and altered subsequently. The Carter administration began its approach to the Middle East with the intention of dealing with, and hopefully resolving, the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁵ The Persian Gulf and the Northern Tier were largely ignored, as the President saw the need to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict before it erupted into warfare again. In his view, the Soviet Union could play a constructive role in the process. Carter saw the Soviet Union as a benign power, possibly interested in promoting development in the region, and not as one necessarily interested in taking advantage of regional difficulties. Cooperation with the

Soviet Union in the Carter administration reached its zenith on October 1, 1977, when the Carter administration and the Soviet Union issued a joint communique stressing the need for "achieving as soon as possible, a just and lasting settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict" and calling for the reconvening of the Geneva Conference of 1973. ⁶

The initiative was designed to accelerate efforts toward reconvening the conference, first convened after the Yom Kippur war of 1973, by securing Soviet cooperation. Nevertheless, the policy was soon abandoned by the Carter administration, and the Sadat initiative replaced it as the operative approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Carter's secondary focus on the Gulf sector shifted with the Iranian revolution, the ouster of the Shah, the taking of American hostages, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In sum, these changes undermined the concepts underlying the twin pillar policy and the Nixon Doctrine, and they raised new concerns about Soviet intentions and policies at the same time that Middle Eastern oil was becoming more important, both as a natural resource and as a source of financial strength. Regional tensions and instability seemed to be growing.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was a major watershed in the Carter administration's policy. Afghanistan had not been an area of primary attention and had been all but ignored by previous United States administrations. The Soviet invasion changed the Carter perspective of the Soviet Union and its policies in the Middle East, and it raised questions not only about the future of Afghanistan but also about the potential Soviet threat to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. It shifted the Carter administration's attention from the Arab-Israeli sector to "Southwest Asia," the core of which was the Persian Gulf. The invasion convinced Carter that the Soviet Union was a hostile, rather than a benign, power that sought regional domination and whose threat had to be countered. The reaction to the altered regional situation developed into the Carter Doctrine. It followed earlier American pronouncements for the area (such as the Truman and Eisenhower Doctrines and the more general Nixon Doctrine) which opposed Soviet and Communist machinations. But the Carter Doctrine focused on the Persian Gulf. It asserted that the Persian Gulf was vital to the United States and its allies and that all action necessary, including military force, would be utilized to protect that interest from a Soviet threat. ⁷

To Carter, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan represented but one step in a broader Soviet thrust toward the Persian Gulf. Implementation of the doctrine confronted the operational reality that the United States lacked the capacity to put it into practice effectively. The Rapid Deployment Force was not yet capable of the requisite actions. ⁸

When Ronald Reagan came to office in 1981, he maintained the Carter emphasis on the Persian Gulf-Arabian Peninsula sector that followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But his approach to the Middle East and its problems derived from a set of assumptions that were quite different from the initial assumptions of the Carter administration and were much closer to the assumptions after the Afghanistan invasion. Reagan held that the fundamental threat to peace and stability in the region was not the Arab-Israeli conflict but the Soviet Union and its policies. It was therefore important to restore American capability and credibility which could be facilitated by building up American forces to deal with the region. Unlike Carter, he assumed that the main focus of American interests and concern in the Middle East was the Persian Gulf sector,

including Afghanistan which could pose a direct threat to the security of the Gulf. Reagan's policy toward Afghanistan maintained that while the United States would employ no military forces of its own, given, in part, that it was unable to secure the support of its allies, it would nonetheless provide aid to the Afghan rebels to pressure the Soviet Union to withdraw its forces.

[9](#)

The Reagan administration introduced the concept of "strategic consensus," which called for the regional states, from Pakistan to Egypt, to cooperate with Washington and amongst themselves to oppose the common Soviet threat. The challenge for the Reagan administration was to convince the regional states that their primary security threat came from the Soviet Union. Regional and domestic concerns were perceived by them as greater threats than those emanating from the Soviet Union. Strategic consensus required access and a regional network of support facilities for United States military forces. A principal incentive of strategic consensus was to be the expansion of United States arms sales to cooperative countries. For this purpose the Reagan administration supported the sale of 60 F-15 and 5 AWACs aircraft to Saudi Arabia. Except for Israel, none of the regional states embraced the concept. The Rapid Deployment Force was built up and renamed the Central Command. But it remained small and its effectiveness against a potential Soviet threat remained untried and uncertain. Nevertheless, the commitment of the Reagan administration to respond to a Soviet threat with military force, if necessary, was sincere.

The clarity of the perceived Soviet threat and role in the Southwest Asian sector of the Middle East did not have a precise counterpart in the Arab-Israeli sector. After the 1982 war in Lebanon, the Reagan Administration launched a "Fresh Start" initiative to achieve resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and to end the civil war and other forms of instability in Lebanon. [10](#) The Soviet Union was not seen as a positive element, but rather as a force hostile to the West with designs in the region that could negatively affect the strategic position of the United States in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as "the stability of the entire Middle East, including the vast resources of the Arabian Peninsula." [11](#)

The Soviet Union opposed the Fresh Start initiative and encouraged its clients to oppose the process. At the same time, the Soviets saw little basis for their own participation in the negotiation process within the framework of the Fresh Start initiative. It continued its negative approach to the various efforts to achieve an Arab-Israeli peace. The Camp David Accords, the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, the Israel-Lebanon Withdrawal Agreement of May 17, 1983, and the continued United States efforts in this vein continued to provide an opportunity for the Soviet Union to object to the United States role and policy. It also was able to further ally itself with the opponents of the process and to link itself with the more radical Arab states and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). [12](#)

In the Reagan administration, there was little expectation that, given Soviet interests and past actions, and the views and policies of the president and his senior advisors, the superpowers could cooperative effectively to achieve a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nor was it likely that they would come to terms concerning the Gulf, especially given the continued Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Superpower rivalry continued as a central feature of the Middle Eastern scene.

In the latter days of the Reagan and the early days of the Bush administration, the basic pattern of the superpower relationship came under reassessment. This was driven by the implementation of Gorbachev's programs of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and the developments in Eastern Europe which ultimately led to the judgment that the Cold War had ended. This, in turn, generated a reevaluation of the Middle East and of the global superpower relationship occasioned by these changes.

At the same time, skepticism about the Soviet Union and the role it might play in the international system, in the new world order, and specifically in the Middle East, was the main theme of much of the discussion in various other forums. Thus, for example, concerns about the Soviet role in the Middle East were articulated by Senator David Boren, Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee in an article entitled "Gorbachev's Ominous Middle East Policy," in the *Wall Street Journal* of March 27, 1991. "Behind Soviet President Gorbachev's peace gambit in the waning hours of the Persian Gulf war may lurk a long-term regional agenda at odds with that of the United States-led multinational coalition." He described the Soviet action as "mischievous" and as constituting a "diplomatic end run".

During the Gulf Crisis of 1990-91, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union went through a series of changes. On January 29, 1991, a U.S.-U.S.S.R. joint statement was released in which the two parties reiterated the American and Soviet commitments to the United Nations resolutions and coalition efforts aimed at ending Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. ¹³ This followed discussions in Washington between Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh, during which considerable attention was devoted to the Persian Gulf situation.

The joint superpower statement was cast in a positive vein. Both parties reiterated their commitment to the United Nations Security Council resolutions adopted in connection with the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait. They agreed that Iraq had to make an unequivocal commitment to withdrawal from Kuwait that would be followed by "immediate, concrete steps leading to full compliance with the Security Council resolutions." They noted that, after the conflict, the establishment of enduring stability and peace in the region would be a high priority of the two governments. "Both ministers, therefore, agreed that in the aftermath of the crisis in the Persian Gulf, mutual U.S.-Soviet efforts to promote Arab-Israeli peace and regional stability, in consultation with other parties in the region, will be greatly facilitated and enhanced." Further, "the two ministers are confident that the United States and the Soviet Union, as demonstrated in various other regional conflicts, can make a substantial contribution to the achievement of a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East." While the Americans and Soviets clearly had points of significant agreement, there were also points of discord. The generalities of the joint statement were not matched by specific program to move in that direction. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf hostilities, it was the United States Secretary of State, James Baker, who launched a peace effort in which the United States was the only external actor of consequence.

The Ambivalence of the Bush Administration

The end of the Cold War called into question many of the working assumptions and the resultant policies that had guided the United States in its view of and response to the Soviet Union and its activities in the Middle East since World War II. This required a reassessment and reformulation of United States policy which began in the late 1980s, but had not been completed at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

The last years of the Reagan administration and the advent of the Bush administration coincided with the accession to and consolidation of power in the Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev. This, in turn, led to a modification of American perceptions of the "evil empire," and later, of the Cold War. The Bush Administration began its tenure as developments in the region and world moved in unexpected directions. These major events included the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, a cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq war, the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, developing Soviet internal political and economic transformation, an assessment of diminished Soviet military capability to threaten the Southwest Asia region, and increasing United States and allied dependence on Persian Gulf oil. These and related developments led the Bush administration to reassess its perspectives of the Gulf and of related Middle Eastern issues. The overriding framework in which the Bush administration operated and made its decisions was described by George Bush in these terms in an address at the Air Force Academy on May 29, 1991:

For 40 years my generation struggled in the confines of a divided world, frozen in the ice of ideological conflict, preoccupied with the possibility of yet another war in Europe. . . . A year before you came to Colorado Springs I was privileged to be here, and I told the class of '86 there's no doubt the Soviets remain our major adversary. Our two separate systems represent fundamentally different values. And since then, we've seen remarkable political change.

Nevertheless, as he suggested, the final verdict was not yet clear.

But let's not forget, the Soviet Union retains enormous military strength. It will have the largest air force in Europe for the foreseeable future, and with perhaps five new strategic missile systems in development they'll be ready for yet another round of strategic modernization by the mid-1990s. ¹⁴

In his address to a joint session of Congress on March 6, 1991 (popularly referred to as the second half of the State of the Union address), Bush spoke of the prospects for a new world order and spelled out some of the specific ideas and requirements of that conception as applied to the Middle East. The new world order was a world not divided by "barbed wire and concrete bloc, conflict, and Cold War." ¹⁵ Among the challenges facing the new world order and the search for peace in the Middle East, Bush identified shared security arrangements in the region, control of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the missiles to deliver them, new opportunities for peace and stability in the Arab-Israeli sector, and economic progress for the sake of peace. Each of these objectives would involve the Soviet Union as a participant or partner in the effort or, in a negative way, as an opponent of these processes, i.e. "a spoiler." Although the nature of a Soviet role was an obvious component of the problem, clearly the

Soviet factor was not articulated. There continued to be a division of perspective in Washington on the Soviet role in the region.

In testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on February 6, 1991, Secretary Baker described what he saw as the relationship between the superpowers in the new world order. His tone and direction was positive. Baker noted that the optimism of the President concerning the new world order derived partly from the fact that there had been growing cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Among the points of "mutual advantage" described by Baker was that "the Soviet Union had joined the international coalition confronting Iraqi aggression" and, he argued, it continues to support completely the full implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolutions. Nevertheless, there was concern about the domestic situation in the Soviet Union, because the ultimate nature and direction of the United States-Soviet Union relationship would depend on the course of domestic reform in the USSR. Domestic developments in the Soviet Union seemed to move in various, and not necessarily clear, directions. Thus, the relationship between the two powers remained somewhat imprecise.

Perspectives on Superpower Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution in the Middle East had been a common theme in both the United States and Soviet diplomatic lexicons for the Middle East for some time. Each of the superpowers had spoken of, prepared plans and initiatives for, and been involved in efforts to resolve the conflicts of the Middle East. The efforts were and continue to be focused on the Fertile Crescent and particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Over time, there has been substantial tension between the goals and objectives, as well as the methods and techniques, of the two superpowers as they approached the problems of the area. At times their interests appeared to coincide; at other times to diverge dramatically. Convergence seemed to occur with the U.S.-Soviet joint communique of October 1977, with agreement on the utility of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 (albeit with differing interpretations of their meanings), and agreement expressed in various summit statements and communiqués. This also was the case with the convening of the Geneva Conference of 1973, despite Soviet exclusion from the actual process that Kissinger orchestrated to achieve the disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Syria. Kissinger assured that the Soviet Union was "informed but not involved."

The Soviet Union continued to believe that it must be involved in any conflict resolution efforts in the Middle East. Despite the aborted coup of 1991 and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, Moscow continued to push for a role in the peace process. Even with a restructured system granting more authority to the Republics, foreign policy concerns continued to emanate from Moscow. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Republics showed little interest in foreign policy issues of this nature. Moscow (now the capital of Russia) saw itself as a major power and considered itself a natural and logical player in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Moscow recognized the "price of admission," to the peace process and continued to edge closer to restoring relations with Israel. It envisioned the 1973 Geneva Conference as a model because of Soviet co-chairmanship, but it rejected the Kissinger approach which effectively excluded the

Soviets by keeping them "informed, but not involved." Moscow sees itself as having and retaining a role in the Middle East and possessing influence. Moscow must be an active participant, since in its view the United States and Russia must play cooperative roles in the region to facilitate peace. The idea of a cooperative role is one in which a semblance of equality is identified, as distinguished from a situation in which the United States dominates or seeks to exclude the Soviet Union, and now Russia, from playing a meaningful and substantive role. The Madrid conference and process reflected this attitude.

American perceptions of the former Soviet Union are based on several propositions: communism as an ideological force is dead; the economy of the former Soviet Union is bankrupt with no meaningful prospect of recovery without massive Western assistance; the economic problems make the republics vulnerable to internal instability; prospects for internal instability within the republics raise the potential of global problems or at the very least threats to the states on its periphery; and the capabilities of the military will decline, yet remain significant. The ultimate conclusion is an American perception that the United States won the Cold War, but also a recognition that it faces a new challenge, which is to influence change in the former Soviet Union to its desired ends. These ends are both political and economic. Politically, the United States seeks the establishment of a genuine democracy within the republics of the former Soviet Union or at the least the evolution of a benign and cooperative autocracy. It is hoped that the leadership can be brought into a partnership with the United States within a new world order centered around United States leadership.

The future of the United States approach to the Middle East will reflect, to a significant degree, its assessment of Russia and its intentions. The Bush administration underwent a substantial metamorphosis on this question, although it did not seem to reach a clear final conclusion concerning the nature and intent of Russian policy in the Middle East. Noteworthy was the absence in post-Cold War statements and policy surveys of references to the former Soviet Union or its successor states as a military threat in the Southwest Asia (SWA) sector, although the concern about the continued Russian role, if not presence, in Afghanistan remains, as does a lingering suspicion of Russian motivation and intent. Nevertheless, the focus of policy concern seems to be associated more with regional developments and the need for resources than with a military threat from the Soviet Union's successor states.

Moscow's role during the Gulf crisis set the tone for the role that the United States seemed to intend for it to play after the crisis -- that of an outsider looking in. The Soviet Union was not a member of the American-led military coalition that applied force to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. The Soviet Union did support the Security Council resolutions which legitimized United States actions in the war. However, Soviet diplomatic initiatives in the days approaching the ground offensive against Iraq instilled in some Washington policymakers the perception that the Soviets were undercutting U.S. policy and leadership.

The Soviet Union strongly believed that it had a legitimate role in the Middle East, based on its proximity, security interests, and its long-standing connections with many of the states in the region. With the inception of *glasnost*, it sought to increase its influence and relations with the moderate regimes in the region by pulling back in its support for its traditional more radical and traditional clients, such as Syria and Libya. At the same time, Moscow sought to strengthen its

influence and relations with its more important, yet troublesome friends in the region -- Iraq and Iran. Overt Soviet support for American opposition to the Iraqis placed this latter interest (strongly subscribed to by the military) in jeopardy. Moscow also had an interest in wanting to limit American presence and influence in the region (especially that of its military) which was countered by the recognized need to continue to improve relations with Washington in hopes of economic assistance.

The Gulf crisis placed the Soviet Union in the uncomfortable position of having conflicting goals and objectives which generated competition internally between the conservatives, the military, and the reformists. Moscow's resultant policies were reactive. Its interests (both domestic and regional) would not allow it to participate in the coalition with the United States against Iraq, nor would they permit it to oppose the coalition. This constituted a lose-lose situation for the Soviets. In order to salvage the situation and minimize its losses, Moscow attempted to adopt a peacemaking strategy. If it could have used its influence with Baghdad to achieve an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, its image as an international peacemaker would have been enhanced, its respect and influence in the region would have increased, and it could have effectively confronted the United States and emerged as a diplomatic victor. United States influence and credibility, and its prospects for continued military presence would have been diminished.

This strategy failed. Saddam Hussein refused to withdraw before it was too late. The U.S. administration had already decided much earlier that the war against Iraq was its best course of action. Washington's agenda was to fashion a new world order in the Middle East that would facilitate an Arab-Israeli peace and establish a security regime in the Persian Gulf which would guarantee continued rule by moderate, friendly regimes and a reliable supply of oil. A successful Soviet peace initiative would have threatened this objective. This threat was made worse in Washington by the perception that the Soviets had not paid their dues and were not deserving of any political benefit or credit from the crisis, especially at the expense of the United States.

American plans to establish a new security order in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East were part of a larger change in United States strategy precipitated by the end of the Cold War. On August 2, 1990, coincidentally the same day that Iraq invaded Kuwait, President Bush publicly set forth a new strategy for the defense of the United States.¹⁶ This new strategy responded to two emerging realities: the end of the Cold War and declining defense budgets.¹⁷ On one level, it sought to promote a realistic appraisal of United States defense needs in a post-Cold War era. On another level, this new strategy sought to gain the initiative and to control the down-sizing of United States forces by limiting Congressional efforts to achieve a "peace dividend" through the diversion of defense dollars to other national programs. The new strategy shifted American attention from the containment of Soviet expansionism to a focus on regional contingencies as well as the support of the forward military presence necessary to deter and respond to the outbreak of regional wars.¹⁸

In applying this strategy to the Middle East, the Department of Defense undertook a major shift in its approach over the succeeding two years. The change was reportedly reflected originally in the instructions contained in the 1992-1997 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), a classified Defense Department publication which provides strategic planning guidance to the military services and the Joint Staff, parts of which were made public in early 1990.¹⁹ The DPG

reportedly directed that contingency planning be focused away from a possible Soviet invasion of Iran or the Arabian Peninsula to defense of the Middle Eastern oil fields from a range of regional threats. Planning would continue to consider the contingency of a Soviet attack, but at a lower priority. Soon after the release of the DPG, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), told the Senate Armed Services Committee that his primary planning focus in the future was the defense of the Peninsula's oil fields as well as responding to interstate conflicts, such as the Iran-Iraq war, which could spill over into the Peninsula and threaten United States interests. ²⁰

This reorientation in Department of Defense thinking developed over several years and was based in great part on the assessment of Soviet military failures in Afghanistan and on Moscow's diminishing capability to project military power beyond its borders. If the Soviet Union could not win in Afghanistan, it could not do so in Iran. In attacking Iran, the Soviets would face terrain as difficult as in Afghanistan but in an area twice as large and with three times the population. Even so, Soviet military operations in the region could not be totally discounted. The Soviets maintained up to 30 divisions in its Southern Theater of Military Operations (STVD) in the North Caucasus, Transcaucasus, and Turkestan military districts. ²¹ Soviet BACKFIRE bombers staging from bases in the South-Central Soviet Union could threaten oil facilities in the Gulf and United States naval forces in the Gulf and Arabian Sea. ²² In the naval sphere, the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron (SOVINDRON) operated in the Arabian and Red Seas from anchorages off the island of Socotra, and facilities in Aden, South Yemen. SOVINDRON strength routinely averaged 12-17 ships, which generally included only 2-3 surface combatants. ²³

In his fiscal year 1989 report to the Congress, Secretary of Defense Carlucci stated:

The oil wealth of the Middle East/Southwest Asia region, its political instability, and its proximity to the Soviet Union make it a target of Soviet aggression -- both ongoing (as in Afghanistan) and potential . . . The Soviet Union's proximity to the Persian Gulf region provides it with significant military advantage. . . . ²⁴

In contrast to the appraisal above, the 1991 Joint Military Net Assessment addresses Major Regional Contingency-East (MRC-E), its major planning scenario for SWA, in terms only of threats from regional forces (Iraq) and does not mention the Soviet Union. ²⁵ It further states:

Future United States presence in SWA will be defined by the post-conflict balance of power among Iran, Iraq, and an increasingly close coalition of moderate Arab states including Saudi Arabia. ²⁶

It goes on to say:

Currently, the strife within the Soviet Union suggests that it lacks both the strength and the coherent political will to threaten United States interests. ²⁷

This latter point was made more explicit by Secretary of Defense Cheney in his January 1991 Annual Report to the President and the Congress:

[T]he Soviet ability to project conventional power beyond its borders will continue to decline, whether that decline is part of a broad strategy of improving relations with the West or whether it is simply an unintended effect of the continued economic collapse of the Soviet Union. For the moment there does not appear to be a constituency for . . . a forward policy in the Third World. . . . The Soviet Union has a sick economy, and it is getting sicker. The military is not able to insulate itself completely from this broader social illness, and, as a consequence, some of its capabilities inevitably will be degraded. Thus, I think overall the Soviets are going to find increasingly difficult projecting power beyond their borders, and that, obviously, will reduce the threat we have faced for the past 40 years. [28](#)

The United States apparently now believes that the Russian and the other Soviet successor states now have more to lose by military adventurism in the Middle East than they might stand to gain. Disincentives would include the loss of the political momentum that had been achieved with the moderate Arab regimes in the region; [29](#) a setback in its improving relations with the United States and Western Europe; and the high probability of an increased United States military presence in the area, if not a direct U.S. military response to such aggression. Any such adventurism would incur great cost for little benefit.

While the Pentagon has effectively re-oriented its strategy with regard to the Soviet military threat, it has been careful to qualify this change. Its caveat basically states that while the Soviets are not currently a significant threat to American global interests, the Soviets have the potential to reverse their course:

[F]rom the standpoint of the Department of Defense and those of us who bear responsibility for maintaining and equipping our military forces, the only safe way to proceed is to allocate resources based upon what we believe to be Soviet military capabilities. Capabilities change very slowly over a long period of time; intentions can change overnight. While certainly we can welcome more benign Soviet intentions, it would be a mistake for us, based simply on an expression of those intentions, to suddenly change our own strategy, unilaterally reduce our own commitments in the military area, or significantly reduce our allocation of resources. . . . [30](#)

While dismissing the regional threat emanating from the Soviet Union, the Bush administration also has dismissed any need to directly include the Soviets in the post-crisis security regime in SWA. The key concepts with which Washington intends to manage security in SWA are collective security, forward presence, security assistance, and regional arms control. It is only in the latter case that the Soviets are expected to make a contribution.

The time has come to try to change the destructive pattern of military competition and proliferation in this region and to reduce arms flows into an area that is already very over-militarized. [31](#)

As part of its strategy to reduce the sources of instability in the region, the Bush administration embraced the concept of an arms control regime which would remove the existing weapons of mass destruction and prevent the further proliferation of these weapons. President Bush proposed a ban on the sale of ballistic missiles to the region with ranges over 90 miles, as well as a ban on the construction of nuclear research and processing facilities. Previously, the Soviet Union has expressed an interest in limiting the proliferation of ballistic missiles in the region and has held discrete discussions with Washington on the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). The Bush administration expected public cooperation and restraint from Moscow. It is in the area of conventional arms control that the United States will encounter problems from the Soviets. Both the State Department and Congress have proposed major controls on conventional weapons, as well as on weapons of mass destruction. The Pentagon and the White House are committed to providing the major arms packages discussed above to the Gulf Arab states as well as major sales to Egypt and Israel. The Pentagon argues that such weapons are needed for regional stability as deterrents against aggression and as "leverage" to promote U.S. interests in the region. ³²

Very much at the center of Soviet perspectives on conflict resolution was the view that arms control was a mechanism for conflict resolution, but if uncontrolled might well lead to conflict. The Soviet Union viewed arms control as a delicate issue because of its domestic ramifications -- arms control reduced demand for Soviet arms which, in turn, lead to loss of foreign exchange and reduced domestic employment which, in turn, has a negative impact on the Soviet economy as a whole. In addition, Soviet arms sales in the region had been an effective means for buying presence and influence. These perspectives have remained constant with the Soviet Union's successor states.

Prospects

The centrality of the Middle East in the Cold War era policies of the United States and the Soviet Union has been significantly altered by the end of the superpower rivalry and the Gulf War. Although both (in the case of the Soviet Union, Russia and the other successor states) powers maintain significant interests in the region, the amorphous paradigm that defines the post Gulf War Middle East no longer includes conflict between the superpowers as an element. For the successor states of the Soviet Union, the primary concerns have shifted from those of an imperialistic empire to the more modest concerns of smaller states seeking primarily economic and commercial opportunities. Although the substantial interests of the United States in the Middle East will include both traditional elements and newer concerns, they will no longer focus on preventing Soviet hegemony in the region. Assuring regional security and stability and access to the oil of the region at reasonable prices will complement the special relationship with Israel and the desire to sustain and improve relations with the moderate states of the region. The superpower rivalry that had characterized the region between World War II and the end of the Cold War has been replaced as the central theme in United States and Soviet Union policies by more prosaic factors that may, on occasion, include cooperative efforts.

Endnotes

1. For a detailed analytical examination of Soviet interests, policies and activities in the Middle East since World War II and the American response, see Bernard Reich and Alexander J.

Bennett, "Soviet Policy and American Response in the Middle East," *Journal of East and West Studies* 13 (1984), pp. 79-112 and Alexander J. Bennett, "The Soviet Union," in *The Powers in the Middle East: The Ultimate Strategic Arena*, ed. by Bernard Reich, (New York: Praeger, 1987), pp. 108-147.[BACK](#)

2. For a full discussion of this early period see Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980).[BACK](#)

3. See "Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen, July 25, 1969" in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard M. Nixon 1969*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 359; and "Annual Foreign Policy Report, 18 February 1970", in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard M. Nixon 1970*, (Washington, DC, USGPO, 1970) pp. 118-19.[BACK](#)

4. See Bernard Reich, "United States Middle East Policy in the Carter and Reagan Administrations," *Australian Outlook*, 38 (1984), pp. 72-80; Bernard Reich, "United States Middle East Policy in the Carter and Reagan Administrations," *Middle East Review*, 17 (1984/1985), pp. 12-23, 60-61; and Bernard Reich, "The United States and the Middle East," in *The Political Economy of the Middle East*, (Washington DC: US Congress, Joint Economic Committee, 1980), pp. 373-399.[BACK](#)

5. See Bernard Reich, "The Continued Quest for Peace: The United States and the Middle East," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey Volume One, 1976-1977*, ed. by Colin Legum and Haim Shaked, (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1978), pp. 21-33.[BACK](#)

6. The text of the United States-Soviet Union joint statement is in *Department of State Bulletin*, November 7, 1977, pp. 639-640.[BACK](#)

7. Carter articulated this perspective in an address to the nation on January 4, 1980. In his State of the Union address to the Congress on January 23, 1980, Carter said that the Soviet move in Afghanistan threatened a region of great strategic importance. He stated the United States response in these terms: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, January 28, 1980, p. 197. [BACK](#)

8. The Carter Doctrine was accompanied by the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida on March 1, 1980. This was a permanent military force designed to deploy rapidly into the region to respond to contingencies threatening U.S. interests, specifically threats to Persian Gulf oil. The RDJTF evolved from a planning concept which was then called the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF). The RDF had been in the planning stages since 1977, when initially directed by Presidential Directive 18 (PD18) which called for the formation of a "deployment force of light divisions with strategic mobility." At its inception, the RDJTF (commonly referred to as the Rapid Deployment Force) was frequently criticized as a "paper tiger" lacking the force structure and firepower to engage effectively projected Soviet forces in the region and facing severe problems in strategic mobility

to get them into the battle. The RDJTF would later become the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) during the Reagan Administration. [BACK](#)

9. See Bernard Reich and Alexander J. Bennett, "Soviet Policy and American Response in the Middle East," *Journal of East and West Studies*, 13 (1984), pp. 79-112 [BACK](#)

10. See Bernard Reich and Rosemary Hollis, "Peacemaking in the Reagan Administration," in *Peace-Making in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects*, ed. by Paul Marantz and Janice Gross Stein, (London and Sydney: Croom-Helm, 1985), pp. 133-155. [BACK](#)

11. Reagan press conference, October 24, 1983, in *New York Times*, October 25, 1983. [BACK](#)

12. See Y.M. Primakov, *Anatomy of the Middle East Conflict* (Moscow: "Nauka" Publishing House, Central Department of Oriental Literature, 1979). [BACK](#)

13. The text of the statement is in *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, February 4, 1991, p. 71. [BACK](#)

14. White House Press Release, "Text of Address to Air Force Academy", May 29, 1991. The *1991 Joint Military Net Assessment* prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted, "Soviet military power, though at long last being reduced and changed in form and purpose, is hardly becoming irrelevant. Whatever the future Soviet state may look like, it still will have millions of well-armed men in uniform and will remain, by far, the strongest military force on the Eurasian landmass. The United States, as the leader of the Free World, must maintain the conventional capability to globally counterbalance the might of the Soviet Union's huge conventional forces, in conjunction with our allies." *1991 Joint Military Net Assessment*, (Washington DC, USGPO, 1991), pp. 1-3 and 1-4. [BACK](#)

15. For the full text of the address, see "The World After the Persian Gulf War," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, March 11, 1991, pp. 161-163, at p. 162. [BACK](#)

16. See President Bush's Aspen Address of August 2, 1990 in "In Defense of Defense," *Defense Issues*, (Washington DC, USGPO, 1990), 5 no. 31. [BACK](#)

17. "Emerging Realities, Enduring Realities", Prepared statement of General Colin L. Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the House Armed Services Committee, February 7, 1991 in *Defense Issues*, (Washington DC, USGPO, 1991), 6 no. 5 (1991), p. 2. [BACK](#)

18. See, "Conflicting Trends and Long-Term Defense Needs," Prepared statement by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney to the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 21, 1991, in *Defense Issues*, (Washington DC, USGPO, 1990), 6 no. 6 (1991), p. 7. See also, United States Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *1991 Joint Military Net Assessment* for a discussion of Major Regional Contingency planning scenarios. [BACK](#)

19. See Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Finds Persian Gulf Threat Ebbs," *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1990, p. A1; Michael R. Gordon, "Discount Soviet Peril to Iran, Cheney Tells His Strategists,"

New York Times, February 7, 1990; and Patrick E. Tyler, "New Pentagon 'Guidance' Cites Soviet Threat in Third World," *The Washington Post*, February 13, 1990, p. A1.[BACK](#)

20. Testimony of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 8, 1990. See elements of General Schwarzkopf's testimony in Patrick E. Tyler, "Soviets Said to Be 'Pouring' Arms, Equipment Into Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, February 9, 1990, p. A 21 and "Central Command: On The Middle East Hot Seat," *Defense Issues*, (Washington DC, USGPO, 1990), 5 No. 18.[BACK](#)

21. See *The Military Balance 1988-1989*, (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1989), p. 42; and United States Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power: An Assessment of the Threat 1989*, (Washington, DC, USGPO, 1989), p. 191.[BACK](#)

22. United States Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power: An Assessment of the Threat 1988*, (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1988), p. 119.[BACK](#)

23. *The Military Balance*, p. 42; and Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power: An Assessment of the Threat 1988*, p. 119.[BACK](#)

24. *Report of the Secretary of Defense, Frank C. Carlucci, to the Congress on the Amended FY 1988/FY 1989 Biennial Budget*, (Washington, DC, USGPO, 1988), p. 36.[BACK](#)

25. *1991 Joint Military Net Assessment*, p. 9-7.[BACK](#)

26. *Ibid.*, p. 4-4.[BACK](#)

27. *Ibid.*, p. 12-1.[BACK](#)

28. Dick Cheney, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1991), p. vii; also see, "Conflicting Trends and Long-Term Defense Needs," in *Defense Issues*, (Washington DC, USGPO, 1991), 6, no. 6, p. 3.[BACK](#)

29. Some of this momentum was probably lost, subsequent to its reestablished relations with Saudi Arabia, due to the displeasure expressed by the Gulf Arab states at Moscow's efforts to assist Iraq in withdrawing from Kuwait unscathed.[BACK](#)

30. See United States Department of Defense, "1990 Joint Military Net Assessment", in *Defense Issues*, (Washington DC, USGPO, 1990), 5, No. 14, p. 3.[BACK](#)

31. Secretary of State James A. Baker, "Opportunities to Build a New World Order," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, February 11, p. 83.[BACK](#)

32. Ann Devroy, "President to Propose Mideast Arms Limits; Partial Ban on Ballistic Missiles Included," *The Washington Post*, 27 April 1991, p. A14.[BACK](#)